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WEB ACCESSORIES FOR INTRODUCTORY ECONOMICS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS

Nancy Folbre

ABSTRACT

This is a brief description of two websites that were developed to supplement introductory economics courses.

KEYWORDS

Teaching, web, Internet

Here is an account of my experiments with developing websites for my introductory economics classes in the spring of 1997. I had a good time and, for that reason, it helped enliven my teaching. But I work in special circumstances, enjoying technical assistance from a partner who specializes in software problem-solving and graphic design. I don't think faculty should feel pressured to develop websites if they aren't enjoying some institutional support, because minor details really can become an aggravation.

I still believe that the most important factor in good teaching is the live, face-to-face talking head. That's why I emphasize the word "accessory" when describing course websites. My goals were (1) to encourage my students to become more techno-hip, (2) to create a site that would help personalize my course and make students feel at home, and (3) to provide useful information.

Economics 103 brings 300 students, mostly first year students and sophomores, together to study Introduction to Microeconomics. Most are taking this course in order to fulfill requirements and prerequisites for other courses. The website I developed started out with a syllabus, homework, copies of old exams, and links to other interesting sites. There was nothing there that wasn't on the hard-copy syllabus I handed out, with the exception of copies of old exams. This little attraction sufficed as an incentive to check out the site (copies of old exams were available in other ways, but none quite so easy).

My policy was not to put anything on the Econ 103 website that students

really needed to succeed in the course, because access at UMass remains difficult for some, especially those without a computer of their own. I was especially concerned about creating a disadvantage for students who felt intimidated by computers simply because they had less experience with them. In a liberal arts college environment, I would have imposed more requirements, and as access at UMass improves, I plan to ask a bit more of students.

I announced the website on the first day of class, and I also administered a simple and anonymous math skills assessment quiz. The last item on the quiz (originally intended simply to fill up space on the last page) was, "Draw a picture that expresses your feelings about math." It was fascinating to see how much anxiety was expressed. Many of the drawings featured guns, guillotines, ropes, knives, and dragons that were labeled as sinister threats to victimized students. My partner scanned some of the more vivid images and we created a "Math Anxiety Gallery" on the website, along with the answers to the quiz.

Then, during the next class, I used projection equipment to show students what the website looked like and how to navigate it. I also showed them a little bit of their own artwork, which made them laugh. Occasionally, I gave lectures that covered material that was not in the text, and later posted some notes on the website. I would never have handed these out in class, both because the photocopy costs are high and because it takes about ten minutes of class time to hand out things in a class of 300. So this was a net addition to the material they could access.

I reserved four points of each student's grade for participation in the lecture, which is independent of participation in the discussion section. These points can be garnered in several ways, including making a brief presentation in front of the class (several topics were suggested in the course of the semester), handing in a typed one-page discussion of how the presentation of one particular topic could be improved, or providing graphic contributions to the course website in electronic format. The latter was a good option for students with more web experience and/or access to scanners.

Economics 105 is called Introduction to Political Economy and is usually capped at about 100 students. This is more of a topics/controversy/current events course, and the website I developed reflected that. It included many links to other sites that would be useful for students writing papers. I had hoped to set up a discussion list, a kind of electronic bulletin board for the course, but my university couldn't support this option at the time.

Instead, I asked students to write down their reactions to the course material on index cards at the end of every class. Sometimes I asked them explicit questions, sometimes not. Afterwards I would go have a cup of coffee and pick out four or five responses that I thought were representative and/or provocative. I would read them out at the next class and also

post them on the website. This turned out to be a neat feature, because it meant that there was a record of some of the arguments and discussions that took place. It gave students a sense of what others were thinking in a context in which they could slow down and reflect on their own point of view outside of an immediate public exchange.

One cautionary note: In my web enthusiasm, I gave my students the option of designing a website relating to the course that could serve as a substitute for a written paper. Only a couple took me up on it, which was lucky, because it was a problem – they both tended to think that a few cool animated images were enough and failed to develop any conceptual content. My sense is that the students who have the easiest time with computer graphics are precisely the ones who have the hardest time with narrative writing. Website design assignments might work better as carefully structured group projects that combined students from different backgrounds.

I am teaching this course again and hope to enhance the website further. It now includes a few images from a multimedia presentation project on downsizing that I am developing. I hope someday this will become a stand-alone website on its own. The Economics 105 site is and will remain available to the public at <http://www-unix.oit.umass.edu/~folbre/econ105>, and I welcome any suggestions from readers.

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